

Time to re-tool in fight for good health

The 350-word limit imposed on opposing viewpoints is hardly adequate to even scratch the surface of the issues that arise when a local court ignores the state Constitution and allows \$20 million a year in public money to be given to a private organization – with no state accountability for its operations. I expect this court order to be overturned by the state Supreme Court so the money unconstitutionally diverted to the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi can be deposited in the state Treasury and legitimately appropriated by the Legislature.

Suffice it to say, Mississippi's kids face many health risks, including cigarette smoking and exposure to illegal drugs. But, some of the Partnership's actions question whether its priorities are more focused on politics than on stopping kids from smoking. There's been no audit that meets Governmental Accounting Standards Board requirements. The Partnership spent \$20,000 on a newspaper ad praising its chairman for winning an award. The Partnership has awarded monetary grants tinged with politics, such as \$2.9 million to the Legislative Black Caucus' foundation, \$800,000 a year to the state attorney general's office, and millions of dollars to private groups that are under the control of Partnership board members.

While the Partnership has done some good work, Mississippi can do better. Mississippi needs a new, comprehensive approach to fighting tobacco addiction and related diseases, including oversight to prevent waste, abuse, and politicizing of public health efforts.

I have proposed such a constitutional and comprehensive program to reduce teen smoking, fight the scourge of illegal drugs, and improve health care not only for our school children but also for all Mississippians.

I proposed distributing the \$20 million annually to four important areas, funded at \$5 million each: They are: expanding the School Nurse Program; maintaining a coordinated anti-tobacco education and advertising program through the Mississippi Department of Health; expanding cancer research, screening, education, and treatment at the University of Mississippi Medical Center Cancer Institute; and increasing the state's support for the fight against drugs.

The fight against teen smoking is simply bigger than USA Today's fixation on one single private organization.